

Message for the First Sunday of Lent, February 22, 2015

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: Genesis 9: 8-17

Sticking with us anyway

The story of Noah and the flood has always captured our imagination. It's one we learn when we are very little. For instance, our daughter decorated the nursery for our grandson with an ark and animals motif. By focusing on pairs of bunnies, bears and bluebirds cavorting under the rainbow we make this ancient dark tale of destruction into a happy children's story of God's provision. And that's OK; this tale is purposefully vague about the details. It is a story which is open to a many interpretations.

In anticipation of preaching on this text I told Bruce I wanted to see the relatively recent movie, "Noah." He was surprised. He sent me a trailer – dark scenes of uproar, killing and destruction – and asked, "Are you sure?" He knows me well; that's usually not my cup of tea. But we watched it anyway. It was full of surprising supernatural phenomena and unexpected story twists. Not entirely biblical. But I don't think there is a way to tell this story that makes real-life sense. It's not meant to be that way. By its very nature, it is open to interpretation.

And there's always an interesting twist to each interpretation. What has stuck with me from this movie portrayal is how devastated the earth itself has become by the time Noah listens to God and starts building the ark. The evil and corruption of humankind – which began back when Cain killed Abel – has also desecrated the land. By the time of the flood, the earth itself is already all but destroyed. Humans have done much of the work of destruction themselves. This is not all God's doing.

God is involved, however. After making arrangements to save the animals and a few humans in the ark, God allows the flood to come. God participates in the destruction. But this, apparently, is a turning point for God. That's a fascinating thing to ponder. We think of God as unchangeable, but that's not being true to the Old Testament story. Time and time again, God has to stop and take stock of how things are turning out. Then God has to adjust God's expectations in order to be able to continue being in relationship with human beings. This story of the flood is a case in point. We learn a lot about God from this story.

I am indebted to Leander E. Keck, who wrote the Genesis commentary for the New Interpreter's Bible, for many of the insights I will share with you next.

The flood story is all about God, Mr. Keck writes. It's about God's decisions and commitments regarding the creation. The beginning and goal of the event lie with God. Noah, his family and the animals are actually secondary characters.

The images of God developed in the story are striking and very familiar from a human perspective. In this story we see a God who expresses sorrow and regret: "The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind and it grieved him to his heart." (Genesis 6:6) We see a God who judges, but doesn't want to, so that judgment happens carefully and with forethought. Think of all those exacting instructions on how to build the ark and who and what to bring into it. We see a God who goes beyond justice and determines to save some creatures, including *every* animal and bird. We see a God who commits to the future of a less than perfect world; a God open to change and doing things in new ways; a God who promises never to do this again. This story reveals and resolves a fundamental tension within God, a tension between perfection and love, emphasizing

finally, not a God who decides to destroy, but a God who wills to save, a God who is committed to change based on experience with the world as it is, and who promises to stand by creation no matter what.

Seeing these familiar human feelings in God reveals something to us about God. The grieving divine response to the great wickedness and corruption on the earth harks back to the morning of the world and relates to all creatures. From creation on, God continues to be open to and affected by the world. God's judgment is not a detached decision like a flicking of a switch or sending an impersonal command through a subordinate. No, God is caught up in the matter. God's judgment is a very personal decision, with all the mixed sorrow and anger that go into the making of decisions that affect the people whom one loves. God grieves what has happened. Grief is always what the Godward side of judgment looks like. Let me say that again because I think this is important for us to understand. Grief, an expression of deep love, is always what the Godward side of judgment looks like.

The change that happens in God is fundamental to this story. It is a change which makes possible a new beginning for creation. The flood doesn't change humankind. But it irreversibly changes God. It is now clear that a commitment to the creation on God's part is costly. The God-world relation is not simply that of strong God and needy world. Now it is a tortured relation between a grieved God and a resistant world. What God does in response to the flood "recharacterizes" the divine relationship to the world. To put it simply, God decides to put up with this state of evil. This startling divine commitment signals the end of any simple sin and consequences arrangement. The new

covenant truly is one-sided. We still have a very hard time wrapping our heads around this one.

But the change in God involves something other than a patient tolerance of human sin. For God to promise never to do something again, and to be faithful to that promise, requires self-limitation regarding the exercise of divine freedom and power. God has to be OK with limited options, in this case, no more flood-like responses to evil in the world. But God does not and cannot simply resign to evil. Therefore, God *must* find a new way of engaging evil. This is where we get to the challenging heart of the matter: God takes the route of suffering. Yes, you heard correctly: God chooses to suffer. Deciding to endure a wicked world, while continuing to open up the divine heart to that world, means that God will continue to grieve. In order to continue relating to humankind, God decides to take suffering into God's own self and bear it there for the sake of the future of the world. We see this suffering God revealed in Jesus.

God's regret-filled response – taking the route of suffering – accepts the fact that humans have successfully resisted God's will for the creation. To continue to interact with this creation means that God chooses to continue to live with such resisting creatures (not your typical CEO!). God decides to go *with* the world, come what may in the way of human wickedness. God makes this promise, not simply in spite of human failure, but *because* human beings are sinful. The way into the future cannot depend on human loyalty; sinfulness so defines humanity that, if human beings are to live, and perhaps to thrive, they must be undergirded by the divine promise. *Because* of human sinfulness, God promises to stay with the creation. Because the need is desperate and God's love is deep, God decides to stick with us anyway. Amazing.

There's a mixture of realism and promise here. On the one hand, human beings remain sinful creatures through and through. The flood cuts us off from any return to paradise; access to that idyllic world cannot be bridged or developed by gradual improvement. For the sake of creation, God must formulate laws to restrain negative human tendencies and behavior. On the other hand, human beings remain in the image of God; we are so highly valued that commands must be put in place to conserve our life, and we retain fundamental responsibility for the larger created order. But humans do not possess sufficient resources for the task; only God can assure creation's future. To this end, God tweaks the workings of divine judgment and promises an orderly cosmos for the continuation of human and nonhuman life. We humans may, by virtue of our own destructive behaviors, put ourselves out of business, but this is not because God has so determined it or because the created order has failed.

That's the meaning of the rainbow. "When the bow is in the clouds, I, God, will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." We take comfort in this visual promise but it is actually a reminder for God, not for us. It is a reminder for God of the changes that have happened, of the commitment made, of the conscious choice to suffer with and for rather than annihilate. It is a reminder that God's love for creation and us human beings is stronger than any evil we can produce or any goodness we destroy. God knows the extent of the damage we can do and God has determined to stick with us anyway. This is truly an upside down/inside out kind of arrangement. One that doesn't make sense but given some of the evil acts and environmental damage in our world today, it is a promise that is full of incredible hope.

We do worship an amazing God. One who loves us and all creation beyond all that is reasonable. One who knows who we are and what we are capable of and is sticking with us anyway. To this our only response is humble, grateful praise.

In a bit we will sing together these words of praise as our hymn of response. Listen with open hearts as I read them now:

We would extol thee, ever-blessed Lord.

Thy holy name forever be adored.

Each day we live to thee our psalm we raise.

Thou, God and Sovereign, worthy of our praise,

Great and unsearchable art all thy ways.

Age shall to age pass on the endless song,

Telling the wonders which to thee belong,

Thy mighty acts with joy and fear relate.

Laud we thy glory while on thee we wait,

Glad in the knowledge of thy love so great.

Thou, Lord, art gracious, merciful to all,

Near to thy children when on thee they call.

Slow unto anger, full of pity, kind,

Thou to compassion ever art inclined.

We love thee with our heart and strength and mind. Amen.